

THE WIGTOWN MARTYRS

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SCOTLAND in the latter half of the seventeenth century produced more than its share of martyrs. Among them were men whose names would in any case have figured largely in the history of the times, such as the "great Marquis" of Argyll, Archibald Johnston of Wariston, James Guthrie, Donald Cargill, Richard Cameron, and James Renwick. But the overwhelming majority were humble and obscure folk, who but for their martyrdom would never have emerged from their obscurity. Of most of them little is known, except the manner of their dying, and their names are now only known to students of history who are familiar with the roll of sufferers. With a few it has been otherwise: their names have lived on, even down to the present day. No martyrdom in all Scottish history has made a deeper or more lasting impression on a whole nation than that of the elderly widow and the young girl who were drowned on the sands of Wigtown on 11th May, 1685.

I

Why were the Wigtown martyrs put to death? The popular idea is that they were executed because they would not renounce the Covenants. Indirectly, of course, their fidelity to Covenanting principles led to their deaths: but that was not the charge against them. The immediate cause of their arrest and condemnation was their refusal to swear the Abjuration Oath; although in the course of the rough-and-ready "trial" to which they were subjected, other charges were made against them.

The drafting of the Abjuration Oath was the doing of a desperate Government—a government which had frankly "run amok," and which "saw red." It ushered in "the Killing Time," the final act in a long-drawn-out drama, known as the fifty years' struggle of the Scottish Covenanters.

The persecution of the Covenanters, which lasted from 1660 to the end of 1688 was, as I have contended elsewhere, first and foremost a political persecution.¹ It was carried on for interests which were political

¹ *The Covenanters under Persecution*, p. 25.

rather than ecclesiastical, secular rather than religious. Charles II and his advisers were not consumed by zeal for the institution of a hierarchy as such : they were concerned only to have the Kirk under control, and found a hierarchy useful for the purpose : they were not in the least interested in the moral and religious welfare of the Scottish people. They did not coerce because they believed that in the atmosphere of an Episcopalian church men would become more spiritually-minded or more moral. What happened in Scotland in the seventeenth century was part of what was happening elsewhere. All over Europe the secular state, the child of the Renaissance, was struggling to make itself absolute ; which meant, in practice, to place the monarch above all law and to make his will supreme in church and state. As Alexander Shields put it in his own picturesque language, " The crowned heads, or horns of the beast, the tyrants *alias* kings of Europe are advancing their prerogatives upon the ruins of the nations' and churches' privileges to . . . a pitch of absoluteness."¹ That this was not rhetorical exaggeration but sober truth is plain to all who care to read through the Acts of the servile Scottish Parliament from 1660 onwards. In 1661, besides the Act Rescissory which swept away all the legislation passed since 1638, an Act was passed declaring it to be " high treason " for subjects " of whatever number, upon any pretext whatsoever, to rise, continue in arms, or enter into bonds or leagues with foreigners or among themselves, without his Majesty's special warrant and approbation had and obtained thereto."² This meant the abolition of the right of association. In September, 1661, the Privy Council prohibited anyone not of " known loyalty and affection to his Majesty's government " from becoming a magistrate or councillor in any burgh.³ Another repressive act stipulated that any person " called to any public trust " must, besides taking the Oath of Allegiance, assert under his handwriting " his Majesty's royal prerogative, as is expressed in the acts passed in the present parliament."⁴ Still more outrageous was the " Act for the preservation of his Majesty's person, authority and government," according to which " all who by writing, printing, praying, preaching, libelling, remonstrating, or by any malicious and advised speaking, express, publish or declare any words or sentences to stir up the people to the hatred and dislike of his Majesty's royal prerogative and supremacy in causes ecclesiastical, or of the government of the Church by archbishops and bishops " were declared not only to be " incapable of enjoying or exercising any place or employment, civil, ecclesiastical or

¹ *A Hind Let Loose*, pp. 1-2.

² Thomson's *Acts of Parliament of Scotland*, VII, p. 18.

³ Wodrow, I, pp. 244-245.

⁴ *Acts*, VII, p. 45.

military within this church and kingdom," but to be "liable to such further pains as are due by law in such cases."¹ Later on came the "Act anent the Supremacy" declaring "the external government and policy of the Church" to be "an inherent right of the Crown."² The successive indulgences were granted by the mere good pleasure of a monarch above all law. All the repressive measures against those who resisted these enactments—laws against conventicles, the act "anent deponing" which ordered ordinary people to be spies and informers on their neighbours and even on their parents, brothers and sisters—were drafted on the same assumption: so was the Test Act and other measures designed to crush all opposition. Charles II and his advisers, having succeeded in undoing the work of the Commonwealth and Protectorate alike in Scotland and England, proceeded in the case of Scotland to establish what we to-day would call the totalitarian state. The parallel with modern totalitarianism is indeed striking—the demand for absolute obedience, followed by illegal detention, the use of spies and informers, torture, and summary execution.

Only the Kirk stood between Scotland and the success of King Charles II's policy, enforced by the successive governors—Middleton, Rothés, Lauderdale, York (afterwards King James VII), and Queensberry; and indeed only a minority of the Kirk. Sadly weakened as it had been by the disastrous quarrel between Resolutioners and Protesters, the Kirk was in no position to stand firm and united. A substantial minority, however, went out "into the fields" rather than submit to the tyranny of the secular monarch. For twenty-nine years the struggle went on. The Covenanters tried both passive and active resistance: two rebellions issued in failure, and in 1680 the government seemed to be triumphant. In that year, however, the left-wing Covenanters, in the Sanquhar Declaration and the Queensferry Paper, withdrew allegiance from the House of Stewart. Richard Cameron and Donald Cargill paid for this daring policy with their lives; but the "Cameronians" or United Societies continued to resist under the leadership of James Renwick, despite the savage measures of the government, who drove through Parliament in 1681 the "Act anent Religion" and the Test, which ordered the curates to forward to the bishops lists of those who absented themselves from their ministrations. This was followed by the "Proclamation with a list of Fugitives, May 5, 1684," authorising "all officers and ministers of our law" to arrest 1956 of these "fugitives," of whom twelve were women.

¹ *Acts*, VII, p. 378.

² *Ib.*, p. 554.

II

On 8th November, 1684, the United Societies issued the Apologetical Declaration, written by their leader, James Renwick. In view of the misrepresentations in which certain professedly "modern" historians have recently indulged, it is of some interest to know what this Declaration really embodied. Miss Mure Mackenzie says of those who refused to disown it that "men were shot . . . for refusing to affirm that the murder of Episcopalian ministers or of the King's servants was unlawful."¹ As a matter of fact, it was explicitly stated in the Declaration that "we utterly detest and abhor that hellish principle of killing all who differ in judgment and persuasion from us, it having no bottom upon the Word of God." It is true that this general principle was qualified by the threat of reprisals against "bloody counsellors" especially that "so-called justiciary, generals of forces, adjutants, captains, lieutenants, and all in civil and military power who make it their work to embrue their hands in our blood, or by obeying such commands such as bloody militiamen, malicious troopers, soldiers and dragoons." But the Declaration went on, "We abhor, condemn and discharge any personal attempts, upon any pretext whatsoever without previous deliberation, common or competent consent, with certain probation by sufficient witnesses, the guilty person's confession or the notourness of the deeds themselves."² The United Societies, well-nigh goaded into despair by pitiless persecution, regarded themselves as at war with the government which they had in the Sanquhar Declaration explicitly disowned; and to state that they identified murder with the fundamentals of Christianity is to make a statement that is palpably false. Only the most extreme Tolstoyans—and Dr. Mackenzie is assuredly no Tolstoyan—have any right whatever to condemn the Cameronians.

The Declaration was itself a counsel of despair, and its publication probably a tactical error; for it gave the men at the head of affairs, men with the mentality of bandits and desperadoes, the excuse for embarking on an orgy of bloodshed and rapine. The answer of the authorities was the Oath of Abjuration, the original draft of which was as follows:

"I, A.B., do hereby abhor, renounce and disown, in the presence of Almighty God, the pretended declaration of war lately affixed at several parish churches, in so far as it declares a war against his sacred majesty and asserts that it is lawful to kill such as serve his majesty in church, state, army, or country, or such as act against the authors of the pretended declaration now shown to me. And I do hereby

¹ *The Passing of the Stewarts*, p. 259.

² The Declaration, Wodrow, IV, pp. 148-149.

utterly renounce and disown the villainous authors thereof, who did as they call it, statute and ordain the same, and what is therein mentioned. And I swear, I shall never assist the authors of the said pretended declaration or their emissaries or adherents in any point of punishing, killing, or making of war any manner of way, as I shall answer to God."¹

"This oath," as Dr. King Hewison put it, "made its swearer own the Church to be a department of state."²

The Government decreed that this oath was to be tendered to all, irrespective of rank or age or sex who had been suspected of disloyalty. There were, of course, thousands who came under that head—people who habitually absented themselves from the ministrations of the "curates" in the parish kirks, people who attended or had in the past attended field-meetings, people who were to be classed as "society people," people suspected of being on friendly terms with the followers of Cameron and Renwick. This oath placed in the hands of irresponsible local "justices" and military officers the power of life and death over their fellows. Local "justiciary commissions"—actually extraordinary military tribunals—had now the power to tender the oath to whole parishes, and to put to death those who, on whatever grounds, refused to swear. These local tyrants, most of them debauched bullies, "men of death and blood"—as Shields picturesquely called them—were only too eager to embark on a general campaign of massacre, and they were given every encouragement to proceed to extremities. For the Privy Council, on 13th January, 1685, instructed the commissioners that if any person own the principles of the Apologetical Declaration, or at least "do not disown them, they must be judged at least by three, and you must immediately give them a libel and the names of the inquest and witnesses—and they being found guilty, are to be hanged immediately in the same place according to law."³ But at this time you are not to examine any women but such as have been active in the said courses in a signal manner and these are to be drowned."⁴ This is quite explicit: women who were known to belong to the United Societies or to be in sympathy with the Cameronians were, on refusing the Oath, to be drowned. The immediate result of these instructions was a crop of summary executions which were simply wanton murders, among them the event known as the Wigtown martyrdom.

¹ Wodrow, IV, p. 157.

² *The Covenanters*, II, p. 442.

³ Many of those who refused to take the Oath and to disown the principles of the Cameronians were not hanged, but shot.

⁴ Hewison, *The Covenanters*, II, p. 454: Wodrow, IV, p. 165.

III

We know little of the two martyrs, and but for the times in which their lot was cast they would have died as obscurely as they lived. The older woman was the widow of John Milliken, a carpenter at the farm of Drumjargan, Kirkinner parish. She is known to fame by her maiden name of Margaret MacLauchlan. Her surname, however, was apparently somewhat indeterminate both as to spelling and pronunciation, and she is referred to not only as MacLauchlan, but as Lachlan, Lauchlan, Lauchlane, Lauchlison, Laughlison, and M'Lauchlison. As there seems to be no definite certainty as to how the surname should be spelt, I shall refer to her in this paper as Mrs. Milliken.

Wodrow¹ and *The Cloud of Witnesses*² give her age as sixty-three. Patrick Walker says she was "past sixty-three,"³ Gilbert Rule, in a pamphlet published in 1691, makes her sixty.⁴ In the minute of the Kirk Session of Kirkinner, dated 15th April, 1711, in which the "sufferings of honest godly people in the late times" were detailed, the "widow of John Milliken, wright in Drumjargan," is described as "aged about eighty,"⁵ while in the petition drawn up by her friends on her behalf after her sentence, she is described as "being about the age of threescore ten years."⁶ There is thus a discrepancy of twenty years as between Rule on the one hand and the Kirkinner minute on the other. It would seem probable that her friends who drew up the petition were more likely to be correct as to her age than those who wrote after an interval of a quarter of a century. The emphasis laid on her advanced age suggests that she must have been more than sixty-three: even in those days a woman of that age was scarcely regarded as very old. Perhaps we are not far from the mark in fixing her age at about seventy.

Nothing is known of her husband, nor is there any evidence as to how long she had been a widow. She had at least one daughter, Elizabeth, who with her husband is mentioned not only in the list of sufferers in the Kirkinner minute, but also in a list drawn up by the curate of Kirkinner and handed by him to the justiciary commission. Mrs. Milliken resided with her daughter and son-in-law and it was in their house that she was arrested.

Wodrow describes Mrs. Milliken as "a country woman of more than ordinary knowledge, discretion and prudence, and for many years of singular piety and devotion; she would take none of the oaths now

¹ History, IV, p. 248. ² p. 322. ³ *Six Saints of the Covenant*, I, p. 329.

⁴ *A Second Vindication of the Church of Scotland*, p. 128.

⁵ Stewart, *History Vindicated in the case of the Wigtown Martyrs*, p. 41.

⁶ Stewart, *ib.* p. 21.

pressed upon women as well as men ; neither would she desist from the duties she took to be incumbent on her, hearing Presbyterian ministers when Providence gave opportunities, and joining with her Christian friends and acquaintances in prayer, and supplying her relations and acquaintances when in straits, though persecuted.”¹ “Some of her intimates said to me,” wrote Patrick Walker, “she was a Christian of deep exercise through much of her life and of high attainments and great experiences in the ways of godliness.”²

More is known of the Wilson family, and the accounts which have come down to us are in general agreement as to Margaret Wilson’s age. Patrick Walker puts it at twenty-three, and the *Cloud of Witnesses* is in substantial agreement, “scarce twenty-three.”³ Shields and Rule agree in making her twenty.⁴ Defoe, whose *Memoirs of the Church of Scotland* were published in 1717, does not name her, but refers to her as “a young maiden of about sixteen years old.”⁵ The Penninghame Kirk-Session minute of 11th February, 1711, in which the sufferings of twenty-nine persons connected with the parish are set down in detail, gives her age as eighteen ; and Wodrow, who acknowledged that his information had been derived from the late minister of Penninghame, the Rev. Robert Rowan, describes her as “eighteen years of age.”⁶ As Rowan was personally acquainted with the Wilson family, we may with some confidence accept his statement, agreeing as it does with that on the girl’s tombstone in Wigtown churchyard.

Gilbert Wilson was a farmer at Glenvernock in Penninghame parish and is described in the Session minute as “in good condition as to worldly things, with a great stock on a large ground (fit to be a prey),”⁷ and this statement is repeated by Wodrow. Gilbert and his wife were “conformists,” outwardly at least : that is to say, they attended the ministrations of the curates and said nothing in public that would have brought them under the notice of the authorities. They cannot, however, have been zealous in their conformity, judging by their attitude to their family, consisting of two daughters and a son—Margaret, aged eighteen ; Thomas, aged sixteen ; and Agnes, aged thirteen. These young people refused to attend the parish church, and we may surmise with confidence that in the case of the two older ones they did so from deep conviction. Probably

¹ Wodrow, IV, p. 248.

² *Six Saints*, I, p. 329.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 329 : *Cloud of Witnesses*, p. 322.

⁴ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 47.

⁵ *Memoirs* (Wilson’s ed.), p. 266.

⁶ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 47 : Wodrow, IV, p. 247.

⁷ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 47.

they had been influenced by the spiritual revival which had manifested itself among the Society people—a revival movement noted by Shields,¹ who stated that as a result of Renwick's preaching, great numbers were brought to Christ "out of ignorance and darkness of nature"; and by Renwick himself who wrote to his friends in Holland that this spiritual awakening among the young was "one of the visible and greatest tokens for good that we have."²

Be this as it may, the young Wilsons were evidently of deep piety and strong convictions. The Penninghame session minute states that "they being required to take the test and hear the curates refused both; were searched for, fled and lived in the wild mountains, bogs and caves. Their parents were charged on their highest peril that they should neither harbour them nor see them; and the country people were obliged by the terror of the law to pursue them, as well as the soldiers, with hue and cry."³ Thomas succeeded in eluding his pursuers until the Revolution:⁴ it was otherwise with the girls.

Margaret would appear to have been a girl of strong convictions, the result of her spiritual experience. Wodrow recorded that during her imprisonment she "wrote a large letter to her relations, full of deep and affecting sense of God's love to her soul, and an entire recognition of the Lord's disposal. She likewise added a vindication of her refusing to save her life by taking the oath and engaging to conformity; against both she gives arguments with a solidity and judgment far above one of her years and education."⁵ The statement in the *Cloud of Witnesses* enlarges on this: "She doth, with a judgment not usual for her age and education, disclose the unlawful nature of the Abjuration Oath, hearing of curates, owning the king's supremacy, which was the thing the persecutors meant by his authority, and proves the necessity of her suffering upon these heads."⁶

Gilbert Wilson was practically ruined by the fines levied on him by the authorities on account of the attitude of his children. According to Wodrow, writing in 1711, "he died six or eight years ago in great poverty. His wife lives, a very aged widow, on the charity of friends." Thomas, after the Revolution, joined the army of King William, and served in Flanders. "He never had a farthing from his parents to enter that ground which they possessed, but having got together somewhat by his own industry, lives now in his father's room and is ready to attest all I

¹ *Life of Renwick in Biographia Presbyteriana*, II, pp. 92-93.

² *Life and Letters of James Renwick* (Carslaw), pp. 168-169.

³ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 47.

⁴ Wodrow, IV, p. 247. ⁵ *Ib.*, p. 248.

⁶ *Cloud of Witnesses*, p. 323.

am writing.”¹ In 1704 he was nominated as an elder, but declined the honour. In 1719, however, he accepted, and was ordained to the eldership on 1st November of that year. “From that date his name appears on the minute book as a member of the Penninghame session down to April 1, 1734.”² If, as is probable, he died in that year, he would be sixty-five at the time of his death. Nothing is known as to the subsequent life of Agnes, the youngest of the three. She may have died early, or else married young and left the district.

IV

Now as to our historical sources. The martyrdom is referred to in contemporary documents. It is possible, though not certain, that the first reference is in the narrative connecting the minute of the meeting of the United Societies dated February 20, 1685, with that dated May 28. “Yea, women, and that both old and young, escaped not their bloody and barbarous hands, by whom some were strangely murdered and many of them carried to prison.”³

It is certain that the martyrs are referred to, though not by name, in the *Informatory Vindication*, written by Renwick and Shields in 1686, and printed at Utrecht in the summer of 1687. In this work, the persecutors are charged with “drowning women, some of a very young and some of an exceeding old age.”⁴ Shields repeated the charge in *A Hind Let Loose*, written about the same time and published in Utrecht soon after. “Neither were women spared,” he wrote, “but some were hanged, some drowned, tied to stakes within the sea mark to be devoured gradually by the growing waves, and some of them of a very young, some of an old age.”⁵ The frontispiece of the first edition of the *Hind* consists of six pictorial representations of the sufferings of the Covenanters, and the sixth is inscribed “women hanged, others drowned at stakes in the sea.” It seems likely that either the *Vindication* or the *Hind*, or perhaps both of them, printed as they were in Holland, came under the notice of the Stadtholder, for in his “Declaration to the People of Scotland,” dated October 10, 1688, William specifically mentioned barbarities such as the “destroying” of the “poor people” by “hanging, shooting anddr owning them without any form of law or respect to age or sex.” Later, just after

¹ Wodrow, IV, p. 247.

² Stewart, *ib.*, p. 52.

³ *Faithful Contendings Displayed*, pp. 163-164.

⁴ *Informatory Vindication*, p. 33. This certainly does not harmonise with the statement that Mrs. Milliken was 63.

⁵ *A Hind Let Loose*, p. 197. Those hanged were, of course, Isabel Alison and Marion Harvie (1681).

the Revolution, in a document addressed to "his royal highness the Prince of Orange," and entitled "the representation of the grievances of many thousands in the church and kingdom of Scotland," it is stated that the fallen rulers had "executed several simple women."¹

In the Marchmont MS., a collection of letters and documents in the possession of the family of Campbell of Marchmont, is a letter initialed L.R., dated "Edinburgh, January 29, 1689," and addressed to "Mr. Robertson, at Mrs. Burt's near the Arch in Crutchet Friars, London." In the course of this letter, "L.R.," who had apparently been travelling over the Lowlands, emphasised the remarkable restraint of the people immediately after the Revolution. "It is a wonder that now, when we have no master, people are kept from outrages and from falling on such as have violently shed the blood of many with less regard than if they had been beasts." Specifying various outstanding atrocities, "L.R." states, "I have been near the place where women were tied to a stake within the sea mark until the sea overflowed them, when the stroke of every wave coming on them was as so many repeated deaths."²

Alexander Shields, in the *Short Memorial of Sufferings and Grievances* issued by the United Societies in 1690, makes the first mention of the martyrs by name. Grierson of Lag and Captain Winram are there charged with having "most inhumanly drowned at stakes within the sea-mark two women at Wigtown, namely, Margaret Lachlan, upwards of sixty years, and Margaret Wilson, about twenty years."³

Gilbert Rule, Principal of Edinburgh University, who had been a moderate Covenanter and had availed himself of the Indulgence, and had been in no way identified with the Cameronians, repeated the statement in 1691. "Some gentlemen," he wrote—adding, with remarkable consideration for their feelings, "whose names out of respect to them I forbear to mention"—"took two women, Margaret Laughland and Margaret Wilson, the one of 60, the other of 20 years, and caused them to be tied to a stake within the sea-mark at Wigtown and left them there till the tide overflowed them and drowned them, and this was done without any legal trial, 1685."⁴ Three Episcopalian pamphleteers replied to Rule, but not one of them attempted to deny this statement. About 1695 a petition for the apprehension of Grierson of Lag was drafted for submission to Parliament by a person or persons unknown. It is uncertain whether or not it was ever presented: it is of interest inasmuch as reference is made

¹ Wodrow, IV, p. 471, 480.

² *Historical MSS. Commission Reports*, XIV (appendix), iii, 171.

³ *Short Memorial*, pp. 35-36.

⁴ *A Second Vindication of the Church of Scotland*, p. 128.

to the cases of "Margaret Lauchlison and Marget Wilson."¹ Matthias Symson, in an attack on the Rev. James Ramsay of Eyemouth, who, in a pamphlet published in 1703 had retold the story, admitted that the old woman and the girl had been executed, though he attempted to minimise the barbarity of the deed. "I know," he wrote, "they generally talk of two women in Galloway—drowned they were indeed, but not tied to stakes within the flood-mark, as this malicious vindication represents, who it seems had no better informer than the frontispiece of that lying pestiferous and rebellious libel, *A Hind Let Loose*."²

This Symson was the son of the Rev. Andrew Symson, who had been curate at Kirkinner, the parish in which Mrs. Milliken resided, and who after his ejection from the parish of Douglas at the Revolution had set up in business as a printer in Edinburgh. The son did not deny the fact of the drowning, because he could not. Ramsay, however, was not done with him. In his reply he said that Symson "takes upon him to deny that the poor women were tied to stakes within floodmark till the sea came up and drowned them, and yet I have a paper from eye-and-ear witnesses of that abominable fact."³ The next reference to the tragedy is to be found in the minutes of the Kirk-Session of Wigtown, under date July 8, 1704, where it is recorded that Bailie John McKeand had petitioned the session to grant him "the privilege of the sacrament" declaring "the grief of his heart" that he should have taken part in the trial of "those women who were sentenced to die in this place in 1685."⁴

The martyrdom was first described in detail in the session minutes of Kirkinner and Penninghame parishes of date 1711. In 1708 the Synod of Galloway, "considering that there is a design of writing a historie of the sufferings of this Church under Episcopacie in the late times," recommended the several Presbyteries to get "ane exact account of the sufferings within their bounds," and in the following year the Presbytery instructed sessions to compile accounts of these sufferings in the several parishes. In February, 1711, statements were given in from Kirkinner and Penninghame. The sessions of both churches ordered that the record of sufferings be written down in the minutes. In the Kirkinner minute the arrest, imprisonment and execution of "Margaret Laughlison, of known integrity and piety from her youth, widow of John Milliken, wright in Drumjargan," was described in some detail. The Penninghame minute is of considerably greater length, and consists of "a collection

¹ Fergusson, *The Laird of Lag*, p. 104.

² *A Short Character of the Presbyterian Spirit*, quoted by Johnston, *Treasury of the Scottish Covenant*, p. 612.

³ *An Examination of Three Prelatical Pamphlets*, p. 38.

⁴ Stewart, *ib.*, pp. 55-56.

of the sufferings " made by the minister, the Rev. Thomas Rowan, and " given up to him by the persons best acquainted with them." Twenty-nine persons are mentioned in the minute. Naturally, the central figures are Margaret Wilson and her family, and the statement was made that her mother was still alive " living in poverty on the charity of friends." Reference was also made to " Margaret McLauchlan " from Kirkinner parish, as fellow-sufferer with Margaret Wilson.¹

In 1714 appeared the *Cloud of Witnesses*, a collection of narratives of the sufferings and dying testimonies of the martyrs, first projected by the remanent Cameronians in 1699. Nearly a page and a half is given to the Wigtown tragedy. Through an obvious misprint, the date is given as 1684 instead of 1685. Three years later Daniel Defoe's *Memoirs of the Church of Scotland from the Reformation to the Union* was published. Defoe, best known as the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, was an Englishman, who during a lengthy stay in Scotland during the Union negotiations interested himself in the sufferings which had been endured in the "Killing Time." Among " some specimens of the bloody mismanagement " of affairs, he gave " the story of a poor woman and a young maiden of about sixteen years old, in the west of Scotland, who were cruelly murdered by some men belonging to Grierson of Lag, an eminent persecutor in that part of the country."² He stated that he received the story from " creditable witnesses." In the main it agrees with the Penninghame minute, differing from it, however, in several details.

Robert Wodrow's *History* was first published in 1721-22, and was the outcome of much careful research, extending over at least fourteen years. His account of the Wigtown martyrdom was apparently written as early as 1711. " History," he wrote, " scarce affords a parallel to this in all the circumstances, and therefore I shall give it at the greater length and the rather because the advocates for the cruelty of this period, and our Jacobites, have the impudence to deny and others to extenuate this matter of fact, which can be fully evinced by many living witnesses. And I shall mostly give my narrative of it from an account which I have received from the forementioned Mr. Rowan, now with the Lord, late minister of Penninghame, where Margaret Wilson lived, who was at pains to have its circumstances fully vouched by witnesses whose attestations are in my hand."³ As might be expected, Wodrow's account is in close agreement with the Penninghame minute. At a later date, however, he was in touch with the then minister of Kirkinner, the Rev. William Campbell, who communicated to him the story of a remarkable dream of

¹ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 41, pp. 47-48.

² *Memoirs*, p. 266.

³ Wodrow, IV, p. 247.

Elizabeth Milliken, daughter of the older of the two martyrs, to the effect that "her mother, Margaret Lauchlison, came to her at the cross of Wigtown, with the garb, gesture and countenance that she had five minutes before she was drowned in Blednoch."¹

Patrick Walker's version of the execution in his tract, *On the Vindication of Cameron's Name*, published in 1727, and containing much miscellaneous information, is much briefer than Wodrow's. While differing from it in certain respects, it is not inconsistent with it. Like Wodrow, he states that "some deny the drowning to be matter of fact." Evidently his authority for his account was Margaret Maxwell, who was fellow-prisoner with the martyrs, and expected the same fate. After being subjected to the indignity of a public flogging on three consecutive days and the added indignity of being placed in the "jougs," Margaret Maxwell was removed to Glasgow "in order to banishment." Either this sentence was never carried out or she returned to Scotland after the Revolution; for Patrick Walker, some time before 1727, came across her in Bo'ness, "an old infirm woman."² As her statements to him were verbal and her account of the tragedy was from memory, it is not to be wondered at that there are differences between Walker's account and that of Wodrow.

A piece of first-hand evidence of considerable importance was that of an aged Wigtown lady, Miss Susan Heron, who died in 1834 at the age of 87. Sir Andrew Agnew, in his *Hereditary Sheriffs of Galloway*, states that Miss Heron often related that her grandfather, James Heron, had been an eye-witness of the execution, and quoted him as having said that "the sands were covered wi' cluds o' folk, a' gathered into clusters, many offering up prayers for the women while they were being put down."³ James Heron died at 94 years of age in 1758, so he was a young man of twenty when the tragedy was enacted.

It is unnecessary to discuss the question of the historicity of the martyrdom. Both Wodrow and Walker, as has been stated, affirmed that it had been denied as early as their time; and little wonder, for it was perhaps the foulest of many foul blots on the memory of the Stewart regime, and even the most enthusiastic Jacobite might well have wished it obliterated. It was not until 178 years after the event that any Jacobite partisan had the hardihood to contend in print that the story of the martyrdom was a myth and that the execution never took place. This was done by Mark Napier, an Edinburgh advocate, Sheriff of Dumfries,

¹ Anderson, *Ladies of the Covenant*, pp. 447-448: quoted from *Letters to Wodrow*, vol. X.

² *Six Saints*, I, p. 330.

³ Agnew, *Hereditary Sheriffs of Galloway*, p. 431.

whose *Case for the Crown* was published in 1863. In the same year an English barrister named Paget wrote an article strongly supporting his fellow-lawyer. The controversy which ensued, marked as it was by Napier's unconcealed hatred of the Covenanters as a whole and by his frequent lapses from good taste, had one consequence which neither Napier nor Paget foresaw. It resulted in such a critical examination of the sources and so careful a sifting of the evidence that it may be safely affirmed that the historicity of the martyrdom was placed beyond doubt, and that the drowning of Mrs. Milliken and Margaret Wilson on Solway Sands may be considered one of the best-attested facts in history.

V

It now remains to tell in brief outline the story of the tragedy which left so indelible a mark on the memory not only of the people of Galloway, but of Scotland as a whole.

The Justiciary Commission held a court at Wigtown on April 13, 1685. Wodrow gives the personnel as consisting of Grierson of Lag; Sheriff David Graham, brother of John Graham of Claverhouse; Major Winram; Captain Strachan; and Provost Coltran. Shields, in the *Short Memorial*, mentions by name only Colonel Douglas, the Commissioner, Lag, and Winram. Four female prisoners were brought before the court—Mrs. Milliken, Margaret and Agnes Wilson, and Margaret Maxwell, serving-maid to the laird of Barwhannie. The last-named would appear either to have taken the Abjuration Oath or compromised in some way, or had influence exerted on her behalf, for she escaped execution.

Mrs. Milliken, according to the Kirkinner minute, was "in her own house taken off her knees in prayer and carried immediately to prison, and from one prison to another, without the benefit of light to read the Scriptures, was barbarously treated by dragoons who were sent to carry her from Mahirmore to Wigtown."¹ She was arrested because her name appeared marked as "disorderly" in the list of parishioners of Kirkinner over twelve years of age, which the curate was required to furnish to the authorities. "Disorderly" meant those who were known or suspected to be out of sympathy with the established regime in church and state. The curate of Kirkinner at the time was Andrew Symson, and he appears to have marked Mrs. Milliken as "disorderly" with considerable reluctance. Symson had the reputation of being one of the best curates in Galloway; he was generally liked, which is more than can be said of his fellow-curates as a class; and he, on his part, said of his parishioners

¹ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 41.

that they were a very well-natured people, "for whom I shall have a kindness as long as I live." Within a month from the date of giving in the list, in the latter part of 1684, he resigned his charge, and was transferred to Douglas in Lanarkshire. Whether or not his resignation was the result of coercive measures applied to him we do not know; the fact remains that Mrs. Milliken was arrested because her name was marked as "disorderly" in the list which he, probably reluctantly, supplied to the Justiciary Commissioners.

The curate of Penninghame, James Colquhoun, seems to have had fewer scruples, and he had apparently no hesitation in designating the three young Wilsons as "disorderly," although the youngest was only thirteen years of age. Apparently the authorities had had their eye on these uncompromising young people for some time. "They, being required to take the test and hear the curates, refused both; were searched for, fled, and lived in the wild mountains, bogs and caves."¹ Wodrow amplifies this statement in the minute by saying that "in the beginning of the year, those two sisters were obliged to abscond and wander through Carrick, Galloway and Nithsdale with their brothers and some others."² He goes on to relate that "after the universal severities slackened a little at King Charles's death," the girls ventured to go to Wigtown to meet some of their friends, "particularly Margaret McLauchlan." In Wigtown they met with a man named Patrick Stuart, with whom apparently they were well acquainted and who pretended to be their friend. Wodrow goes on to say that, after meeting them, Stuart proposed drinking the king's health, which they refused to do. He then betrayed their whereabouts to the authorities, and brought a party of soldiers to their temporary abode. The girls were arrested, and "as if they had been great malefactors, they were put in the thieves' hole, and after they had been there for some time, they were removed to the prison where Margaret McLauchlan was."³

The old woman and the two girls were, on April 13, along with Margaret Maxwell, charged with rebellion at Bothwell and Aird's Moss, and with being present at twenty field conventicles and twenty house conventicles. The first part of the charge was manifestly absurd in regard to the Wilson sisters. As the Penninghame minute has it: "it is weel known that none of these women were within twenty miles of Bothwell or Airds-Mosse—and Agnes Wilson, being eight years of age at the time of Airds Mosse, could not be deep in rebellion then, nor her sister of thirteen years of age and twelve years at Bothwell Bridge its tyme."⁴ Wodrow added that

¹ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 47.

² Wodrow, IV, p. 247: "brothers" is obviously a misprint for "brother."

³ Wodrow, IV, p. 248.

⁴ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 47.

"Margaret McLauchlan was as free as they were"¹ of complicity in the rebellions. He stated that all three refused the Abjuration Oath—a fact which the Penninghame minute rather curiously omits, but which is also given in the *Cloud of Witnesses*. The Penninghame minute then states that "the assize did sit and brought them in guilty and these judges sentenced them to be tyed to palisades fixed in the sand, within the flood-mark and there to stand till the flood overflowed them and drowned them."² Wodrow reproduces this statement, using the more common word "stakes."³ The *Cloud* adds that they were commanded to receive the sentence on their knees, that they refused to do this and "were pressed down by force till they received it."⁴ According to the Penninghame minute, the *Cloud*, and Wodrow, the execution was fixed for May 11 : Dr. King Hewison, however, preferred May 2 as "the most suitable date."⁵

The Penninghame minute records that "they received their sentence without the least discouragement with a composed smiling countenance, judging it their honour to suffer for Christ's truth, that He is alone King and Head of His Church."⁶ After sentence had been pronounced, their relatives and friends became active in endeavouring to secure a reprieve. The Penninghame minute and Wodrow both state that Gilbert Wilson succeeded in obtaining the liberation of Agnes, under a bond of one hundred pounds sterling, and that he had to go to Edinburgh in order to obtain this. In the case of Mrs. Milliken, it is known that a petition in her name was forwarded to the Privy Council, authenticated by William Moir, notary public, as the old woman was unable to write. The petition indicates her willingness to take the Abjuration Oath and entreated the council to "take pity and compassion" on her in view of her age—"three-scor ten" years—and to recall the sentence "so justly pronounced against me": promising to "frequent the ordinances and live regularly."⁷ The petition was quite evidently neither written nor dictated by Mrs. Milliken: it is quite incredible that in view of her attitude at her trial and later at her execution she could have approved of such a letter. As Stewart contended, the petition is "evidently not the petition of the illiterate old woman as regards its style; and it may be supposed that it is as little hers as regards its matter and substance. The friendly hand that drew it framed it to suit the views of the Government and to obtain their pardon, in the hope that the old woman would succumb and accept of her life on the terms on which alone she could be pardoned."⁸

¹ Wodrow, IV, p. 248.

² Stewart, *ib.*, p. 47.

³ Wodrow, IV, p. 248.

⁴ *Cloud of Witnesses*, p. 322.

⁵ *The Covenanters*, II, p. 474.

⁶ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 49.

⁷ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 21.

⁸ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 22.

No copy of any petition on behalf of Margaret Wilson has ever been discovered. It is possible that her family and friends took action on her behalf; but it seems more likely that only one petition was sent to Edinburgh, and that when the Privy Council decided to recommend a reprieve for the older prisoner, they did so in the case of the younger also, feeling that Lag and the others had overplayed their hand. The Council did "discharge the magistrates" from executing the prisoners and recommended the Secretaries of State to interpose with the King for a remission. This was on April 30; yet on May 11—or May 2 in Hewison's opinion—the execution took place. The authorities at Wigtown, if they were informed of the Council's decision, ignored it. Hewison thought that in view of the reprieve "the officers in Wigtown dared not have executed on the 11th May,"¹ for which reason he preferred May 2 as the date of the final tragedy. It seems to me that Lag and his colleagues, cruel and bloodthirsty men as they were, were quite fit to defy the Privy Council, well knowing that if they did so, nothing more would be heard of the matter.

There seems no reason to doubt that it was on May 11—the date given in the Penninghame minute, and by Wodrow and Walker—that the two prisoners were led out to execution. Wodrow mentioned a numerous crowd of spectators; he stated that the prisoners were tied to separate stakes, and this is implied in the Penninghame minute and in Walker's narrative. The *Cloud* and Defoe represent them as both tied to one stake. There can be little doubt that the Penninghame minute, written by Rowan, who was Wodrow's chief authority, and independently confirmed by Walker, is to be preferred.

Most accounts make comparatively little of Mrs. Milliken's last moments: the younger martyr is the central figure in the Penninghame minute and in Wodrow's and Walker's accounts. Defoe, however, on the authority of "creditable witnesses" stated that when asked to pray for the king, "the woman"—by whom he obviously meant Mrs. Milliken, for he referred to Margaret Wilson as "the young girl" and "the maid"—told them she would pray to God to forgive the king's sins. "But it would be an impious thing, said the woman, to pray to God to save—that is to bless—a covenant-breaking, perjured magistrate. . . . The woman said boldly that while the king was a persecutor of God's people, he was an enemy to God and the Church of God, and she thought it was an abominable thing to ask of any Christian to pray for prosperity to the persecutors of the Church of Christ—for that was to say God-speed to them—even in the very persecution itself. She was an undaunted woman

¹ *The Covenanters*, II, p. 475.

and challenged them to answer them her in that particular, but they had nothing to say to her arguments, but thought she would have some regard to theirs, which was, Pray to God to bless the king—or die. Will ye kill me, says the woman, because I will not bless those who God curses? The Lord forbid that I should do it, though I were to die a thousand times.”¹ Patrick Walker, on the other hand, said that when the old woman was tied to the stake, “enemies” said it was needless to speak to her. “Let her go to hell,” they said, dismissing her with a coarse epithet.² But this does not necessarily contradict Defoe’s narrative. According to the Kirkiner minute, Mrs. Milliken was “held down within the water by one of the town officers by his halbert at her throat till she died.”³

Margaret Wilson was undoubtedly the central figure, probably on account of her youth: the drowning of a girl of eighteen naturally aroused deeper emotions than that of an old woman of seventy or more. The Penninghame minute, Wodrow, and the *Cloud* all agree that Mrs. Milliken was drowned first so that Margaret’s resolution might be shaken, and that she might recant. They asked her, according to the Penninghame minute, what she thought of her fellow-sufferer now. “She answered, What do I see but Christ wrestling there? Think ye that we are the sufferers? No, it is Christ in us, for he sends none a warfare on their own charges.”⁴ Wodrow added in brackets after the word “Christ,” “in one of his members”;⁵ and the *Cloud* inserted, also in brackets, the word “mystical.”⁶

Following the Penninghame minute, Wodrow recorded that after this, Margaret sang the 25th Psalm from verse 7, beginning:

“My sins and faults of youth,
Do Thou, O Lord, forget;
After Thy mercy think on me,
And for Thy goodness great.”

She sang the psalm “downward a good way, and read the 8th chapter to the Romans with a great deal of cheerfulness and then prayed. While in prayer the water covered her.”⁷

All accounts agree that the brave girl was pulled out of the water and given a last chance to save her life. “Before her breath was quite gone, they pulled her up and held her till she could speak, and then asked her if she would pray for the king. She answered that she wished the salvation of all men, but the damnation of none.”⁸ One of the onlookers,

¹ *Memoirs*, pp. 266-267. ² *Six Saints*, I, p. 329. ³ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 41.

⁴ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 48.

⁵ Wodrow, IV, p. 249.

⁶ *Clouds of Witnesses*, p. 323.

⁷ Wodrow, IV, p. 249.

⁸ Stewart, *ib.*, p. 48: Wodrow, IV, p. 249. Walker makes her say, “salvation to all the elect.”—*Six Saints*, I, p. 329.

deeply moved, cried out, "Dear Margaret, say God save the king, say God save the king." She answered "in the greatest steadiness and composure, God save him if He will: for it is his salvation I desire."¹ Some of her relatives, according to both accounts, called out to Major Winram, "She hath said it, she hath said it."

Walker added that Lag interposed at this point, and, flinging a coarse epithet at the defenceless girl, called out, "We do not want such prayers; tender the oaths to her";² whereupon the Major came near and offered her the Abjuration Oath, charging her instantly to swear it, otherwise return to the water. Most deliberately she refused, and said, "I will not, I am one of Christ's children, let me go."³ Walker adds that in refusing she said, "No, no sinful oaths for me." They said, "To hell with them, to hell with them, its o'er good for them."⁴ Whereupon she was thrust again under the water. According to a local tradition, the town's officer who thrust her down with his halbert said sarcastically, "Tak' anither drink, hinny: clep wi' the partans,"⁵ and it is not impossible that this rough and unseemly jest was the last bit of human speech to reach the girl's ears ere the sea "breathed o'er her dying brain its last monotony."

Many eulogies both in prose and verse have been written of the Wigtown martyrs and especially of the younger one, cut off in her girlhood; to add to these would be superfluous. The two martyrs—the old widow with the weight of her years upon her, and the young girl standing on the threshold of womanhood—did not lay down their lives in vain. Assuredly they played their part among the thousands of humble and obscure folk who, prizing freedom above life itself, sacrificed their all, and in doing so ensured that Christian liberty would not perish in Scotland and in the world.

¹ Wodrow, IV, p. 249.

³ Wodrow, IV, p. 249.

⁵ Fergusson, *The Laird of Lag*, p. 71.

² *Six Saints*, I, p. 329.

⁴ *Six Saints*, I, p. 330.